An Inappropriate Football "Formation:" Beyoncé's 2016 Super Bowl Performance, Mystery, and the Narratives of Football and Race in America

Richelle Hurley

Communication

Abstract: Sports often serve as a microcosm for culture and society, and thus when meanings surrounding sports are disrupted, it likely represents a larger disruption of cultural and societal meanings, as well as group and individual identities. One can view Beyoncé's 2016 Super Bowl performance as disruption to constructed meanings—particularly meanings surrounding sports—as the American public voiced mixed reactions to the performance and its context. Through a social constructionist lens, and through an analysis of perspectives from Pearce, Dewey, and Berger & Luckmann, this essay understands Beyoncé's 2016 Super Bowl performance as a mystery and an alternative narrative to the constructed meanings of sports, activism, and race in America. [End Abstract]

Introduction

2016 was a big year for superstar singer Beyoncé Knowles. She released a new album, titled “Lemonade,” which was supplemented by an hour-long film that expanded on the album’s themes, and included a full narrative with context and imagery. The album sparked lots of conversation for its themes of infidelity, black womanhood, and race in America (Hilmantel, 2016). Following the release of the album and film, 2016 also found Beyoncé embarking on the “Formation World Tour,” during which she performed at sold-out stadiums around the world. She performed at a number of awards shows throughout the year, and performed at a concert in Cleveland to endorse presidential candidate Hillary Clinton and to promote voting in the 2016 election. Her year ended with nine Grammy nominations, potentially making her the female artist with the most Grammy wins of all time.

All of the year’s success and attention, however, began in February of 2016 when the artist made headlines for her provocative performance at the Super Bowl. The performance sparked both applause and criticism, as the public began to debate the performance, appropriateness, and validity of Beyoncé’s message. Although this debate has largely featured writings drawing on critical race and feminist perspectives, in this essay I contend that another, overlooked perspective can be just as valuable in unpacking its complexities: the constructionist perspective of communication. As the remainder of this essay will make clear, I believe that constructionists authors such as John Dewey, W.B. Pearce, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann offer an important understanding of communication in which meaning is not absolute, but is instead a public process where people use communication to create meaning and make sense of the world. As a result, through this constructionist perspective on communication, we can read

Beyoncé's 2016 Super Bowl performance as revealing mystery, an alternate definition of reality that actively opposes the collectively constructed meanings surrounding American football—and, further, this mystery therefore reveals how these meanings support the institution of race in the United States.

"Formation"

The significance of Beyoncé's performance began to form the day before the Super Bowl, on February 6th, 2016. Without any warning, the singer released the song "Formation" and its music video to Tidal, an online music streaming service owned by the singer's husband, rapper Jay-Z. The "Formation" video features a myriad of images and lyrics that speak to several different tensions in and critiques of present-day America. The video opens with Beyoncé sitting on a New Orleans police cruiser sinking in water, with an accompanying voiceover that asks, "What happened after New Orleans?" The images and lyrics that follow present a number of identities, themes, and political statements that are crucial to the significance of the album.

In one prominent theme, Beyoncé highlights and celebrates her black Southern heritage, with images of herself and other black women sitting in a parlor dressed in lace dresses, twirling umbrellas and fanning themselves with lace fans—all images reminiscent of life in the Old South. Shots of New Orleans and Mardi Gras appear repeatedly throughout, along with choreography reflecting "black southern parade and club cultures…From the parlor to the street, the black South slays in rhythm and formation" (Robinson, 2016). These images are supplemented by lyrics in which Beyoncé references her own southern ancestry: "My daddy Alabama, my momma Louisiana, you mix that Negro with that creole make a Texas-Bama" (Beyoncé, Sremmurd, R., Frost, J., Hogan, A., & Mike Will Made It, 2016, track 12). Beyoncé then sings, "Earned all this money, but they never take the country out me," later followed by a

voiceover that proclaims, “I like cornbreads and collard greens, bitch, oh, yes, you besta believe it.” And in one of the most famous lines from the song, Beyoncé definitively states, “I got hot sauce in my bag, swag” (Beyoncé et al., 2016, track 12). Through these images and statements, the video and song work together to create a bold proclamation of black southern pride.

However, in addition to celebrating black southern heritage, “Formation” does not shy away from politics, as the video makes explicit references to the current state of race relations in America. The strongest statement comes towards the end of the video, as a young black boy wearing all black clothes dances in front of a line of armed police officers, and then stops dancing to stand directly in front of the officers with his hands up. The camera then pans across a brick wall that displays the black graffiti declaration: “Stop shooting at us.” The imagery is powerful, and is, at its most basic level, a clear acknowledgement of the increasingly publicized occurrences of police brutality in America and a sign of support for the Black Lives Matter movement.

Granted, these two themes do not exhaust the more complex layers and nuances of “Formation.” As one *New York Times* article put it: “‘Formation’ isn’t just about police brutality — it’s about the entirety of the black experience in America in 2016, which includes standards of beauty, (dis)empowerment, culture and the shared parts of our history” (Caramanica, Morris, & Wortham, 2016). The video’s release created an explosion of discussion on social media sites about the video’s various themes and messages, all of which increased the suspense leading up to Beyoncé’s Super Bowl performance the following day.

Unsurprisingly, the performance was an extension of the video, and created an even larger uproar because of the event’s prominence and audience size, the context of the event, and the composition of the audience; in comparison to Beyoncé’s usual fan base, football usually

draws a large male (and white) audience. The Super Bowl is often the year's top-rated television program, and 2016 was no exception. The February 7th broadcast drew 111.9 million viewers, making it the third most-watched event in U.S. television history (Bauder, 2016). The peak viewership period of the program was between 8:30 and 9:00pm, which was about the timespan of the halftime show (Pallotta & Stelter, 2016). Beyoncé's section of the performance was sandwiched in between performances by pop singer Bruno Mars and pop-rock group Coldplay. Her portion, which lasted about one minute, featured her, 30 other black female dancers, and a small all-black, all-female marching band performing an abbreviated version of "Formation"—which then transitioned into a collaborative performance with Mars and Coldplay in a rendition of Mars's song "Uptown Funk."

Since many people had already heard the song the day before, much of the performance's significance came in the choreography, outfits, and context of the event. Beyoncé's dancers wore leather long-sleeve tops and shorts, bullet belts, black boots, and donned black berets over afro hairstyles – all resonant of the Black Panther Movement, which, likely to Beyoncé's knowledge, started in Oakland, California exactly 50 years prior to the performance (Rao, 2016). Beyoncé herself wore a black leotard with a gold bandolier of bullets, an item identical to one that Michael Jackson wore during his 1993 Super Bowl performance and world tour (Zaru, 2016). The choreography also alluded to the Black Panther movement when dancers raised their fists in unison as Beyoncé sang, "I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making." At another point in the performance, the dancers formed a large "X" formation, which some speculate was a reference to Civil Rights leader Malcolm X. The political statements continued after the show, as the dancers posed in pictures (which they later posted to various social media sites) with signs

calling for justice for Mario Woods, a 26 year-old black male from San Francisco who was shot over fifteen times by police officers after he “slashed” a stranger (Rogers, 2016).

The combination of the song, video, and performance sparked a large controversy over Beyoncé’s message. Some viewers were supportive, and applauded the singer for using such a widely viewed event like the Super Bowl to make a much-needed statement about social injustice. For example, Black Lives Matter activist Erika Totten felt Beyoncé’s performance decision was appropriate: “‘I think [the message] absolutely belongs in the Super Bowl,’ Totten said. ‘Our goal is to disrupt the status quo and bring the message wherever the message may not be heard’" (Zaru, 2016).

Others, however, thought the Super Bowl was an inappropriate space for the message, and saw it as an attack on law enforcement. In one example, following the performance, former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani spoke with Fox News and said, “This is football, not Hollywood… and I thought it was really outrageous that she used it as a platform to attack police officers who are the people who protect her and protect us, and keep us alive” (Zaru, 2016). Police officers and groups across the country had similarly negative reactions. National Sheriffs’ Association Executive Director Jonathan Thompson claimed the performance was “inciting bad behavior… Art is one thing, but yelling fire in a crowded theater is an entirely different one” (Chokshi, 2016). One precinct in Miami decided to take action, and collectively called for a boycott of Beyoncé’s upcoming performance in the city: “The Miami Fraternal Order of Police said in a statement that it had voted to let its members boycott the show, scheduled for April 27, because it believed Beyoncé had used this year’s Super Bowl halftime show ‘to divide Americans by promoting the Black Panthers’” (Rogers, 2016). The group called for other law enforcement organizations to boycott her concerts as well (Rogers, 2016). Beyoncé then took

advantage of the backlash, and sold “Boycott Beyoncé” t-shirts at her concerts for fans to wear. On the whole, Beyoncé’s performance was explosive, and reignited already-tense conversations surrounding race and police brutality and America.

Race, Sports, and Communication

Context and setting were crucial to the significance of and uproar over Beyoncé’s performance, as the Super Bowl is arguably the biggest sports spectacle in American culture. The sports world is one that has long dominated American culture, and thus it holds an influential place in our society. As a result, scholars have long recognized the significance of sports and communication. One can see this cultural pervasiveness in the way that sports communication has infiltrated everyday speech through the adoption of sports mentalities and sports metaphors in non-sports contexts (Kassing et al., 2004, p. 375). Sports speech influences much of culture, as it can, for example, build an emphasis on winning, masculinity, and aggression (Kassing et al., 2004). Sports can also serve as a source of identity for viewers. After all, sports are not just about entertainment, but are an opportunity for viewers to become part of a community, to communicate an affiliation, and to show loyalty and empathy to a team or athlete and/or a united hatred to opposing teams or athletes (Kassing et al., 2004, p. 390). This identification, however, can also make fans susceptible to identity threats when events violate set norms and expectations, both on and off the field (Sanderson et al. 2016, p. 307). Whether a player drops a crucial pass or the media reveals a scandal about a team’s CEO, fans change their communication so as to align with the constructed norms of fan loyalty. As studies like these have demonstrated, sports are influential on culture as a whole, but also on an individual’s identity.

Further, sport serves as a microcosm for culture because the world of sport mirrors significant patterns and behaviors evident within society as a whole. For example, many communication scholars have examined the issue of race in sports, which can serve as a window into broader patterns of racial injustice in culture (Halone, 2008, p. 23). One particularly popular avenue of such research is the analysis of media portrayal of athletes. Studies have found discrepancies in how athletic intelligence is discussed in the media, as white athletes are often portrayed as more intelligent than their black counterparts (Kassing et al., 2004, p. 386; Halone, 2008, p. 23). Athletic ability is also attributed differently, as commentators often attribute white athletic success to hard work and black athletic success to innate ability (Kassing et al., 2004, p. 386; Halone, 2008, p. 23). In addition, white athletes are also more likely to be regarded as natural leaders over black athletes (Kassing et al., 2004, p. 386; Halone, 2008, p.23; Wonseck, 1992). Many of these discrepancies are a reflection of the racial ideologies existent within society, and thus the communicative study of sports can serve as an avenue for cultural exploration and understanding.

Yet, while sports may in this way mirror many social practices and patterns, it is also organized according to its own unique rules, especially when it comes to social campaigns or statements. On the surface, sports can be a great space for advocacy or awareness, as “sport can be fertile ground to launch many types of social and marketing campaigns since sport encompasses broad territories of meaning. Sport has legions of participants and massive audiences of potential consumers” (Duvall & Guschwan, 2013, p. 304). However, there are rules—often informal ones, created and reinforced by fans—that determine which types of campaigns are acceptable, and which are not. Sanderson et al. (2016) conducted a content analysis of social media posts following an incident in which five black St. Louis Rams football

players displayed a “hands-up” gesture during a game as a response to the Michael Brown case in Ferguson, Missouri. Sanderson et al. (2016) found that many fans rejected the action, as “unequivocal support of law enforcement was a non-negotiable group value” (p. 315). In this particular case, the protest action violated constructed group values, and thus the fans responded negatively. Sanderson et al (2016) concluded that the groups values of Rams fans “fell along two strands: (a) that sporting events (in this case, a football game) are inappropriate venues for activism and (b) that law enforcement is an authoritarian entity that is not to be questioned” (p. 315). As this study suggests, sports may be an opportune space to communicate a message because of its large and attentive audience, but the messages must align with the constructed meanings of the event in order for them to be well received.

Other studies indicate that this conditional relationship between sport and advocacy is also characteristic of the Olympics. As Bass (2002) explains, former head of the International Olympic Committee Avery Brundage believed “that the Olympics were ‘the one international affair for Negroes, Jews, and Communists’ rather than a place to rally for human rights” (p. 186). Since the Olympics have been defined as representing unity, any opposing narrative will likely face resistance. The associated sporting events are typically framed as harmonious and/or nationalist events, and thus activism can easily infringe on group values and threaten group identity. This may result in rejection or criticism of participating athletes: “athletes who question authority will be subjected to harsh reactions from in-group members (fans), who equate sport (in this case football) as being distinct from social and political issues, or at least a place where these issues should not be challenged” (p. 317).

While race and sports have long served as topics of academic inquiry, most of the research in this area focuses on sports media, and/or the social psychology and sociology of

sports phenomenon. Much less research exists on how meaning is created in the sports world, and how these constructed meanings might conflict with the meanings constructed by activist actions undertaken by athletes and others. As a result, this essay seeks to broaden the communication literature on race and sports by engaging the social construction of sport and activism; to that end, the remainder of this essay offers a study of the constructionist perspective of communication as it relates to Beyoncé's 2016 Super Bowl halftime show performance.

Constructionist Communication Perspective

Although encompassing a variety of writers and concepts, the constructionist perspective of communication generally views meaning as not inherent, but rather constructed collaboratively through language and other forms of communication. John Dewey (1988), one of the early contributors to this perspective, presents communication as the primary vehicle for the construction of meaning. For Dewey, communication is freeing: "Communication is uniquely instrumental and uniquely final. It is instrumental as liberating us from the otherwise overwhelming pressure of events and enabling us to live in a world of things that have meaning" (p. 159). Without communication, we could not create meaning, and without meaning we would not be able to process or make sense of the world. Decades later, W.B. Pearce (1989) similarly approached language as a freeing tool, describing it as a "liberation of mere facticity"; as he explains:

> The term 'liberation of mere facticity' is deliberately provocative. I use it deliberately to name the emancipation that comes as an unintended consequence of naming the world around us and then ensconcing those names within the webs of grammar and the plot lines of stories. All at once we live in a world of our own creation – and whose nature we often forget, confusing the stories told with the process of storytelling (p. 73).

Language is freeing as it allows us to name our world, but this naming simultaneously complicates human existence far beyond the bounds of nature or biology. The more we name our experiences, the more complex the networks of our world become.

As complicated as the naming process becomes, it is vital to human existence. After all, a world without communication and meaning is a world of passive existence where events happen to people who are helpless in trying to make sense of them. Communication frees us from this state, and allows us to collectively convert happenings into stable objects of contemplation and action: "When communication occurs…events turn into objects, things with a meaning… Where communication exists, things in acquiring meaning, thereby acquire representatives, surrogates, signs, and implicates, which are infinitely more amenable to management, more permanent and accommodating, than events in their first estate" (Dewey, 1988, p. 132). Through communication people assign meaning to an event, thereby making it an object, and then that object is reconsidered, revised, and re-adapted to fit the given situation (Dewey, 1988, p. 132). For this reason, context plays a significant role in meaning creation. Pearce (2005) explains the importance of context in his "Coordinated Management of Meaning":

> Because actions are meaningful in contexts, the interpretive process of describing the embedded contexts helps answer the question, 'What did they do?' To address the subsequent question, 'Why did they do that?' we used the philosophical concept of 'deontic logic.' This is a logical system that uses terms of 'oughtness' to act rather than the verb 'to be.' That is, rather than starting with the premise that 'all men *are* mortal,' deontic reasoning might start with the premise 'I *should not* kill innocent people.' As we employ the concept in CMM, it is a way of expressing the extent to which all of us, when

> interacting with each other, feel that we must/should/may/must not respond in certain ways. (p. 40)

This deontic logic implies that in our process of meaning creation, we establish appropriate places and times for behaviors. We make events into objects, and then we categorize those objects based on "oughtness."

From Pearce's (1989) perspective, this meaning creation process can be described as storytelling. As we assign meaning to the world, we tell stories about it. In order for the meaning to hold, people need to believe the story, and thus enter into a suspension of disbelief: "Particular symbolic systems encourage certain ways of thought and action, and *to the extent that those who use the language will have suspended their disbelief is in those stories,* they will think and act in those ways" (p. 40) The more people believe the stories and meanings we attribute to events, the more people will act in accordance with the ideas of the story. The more a person suspends their disbelief in the story that beauty means a slim figure, the more that person will try to attain and/or maintain a slim figure. This dedication to a story is what Pearce (1989) calls "enmeshment," and it can have serious implications for social meaning creation.

Stories and meanings are products of human collaboration, and exist exclusively in the public sphere. Communication allows for meaning creation to be a collaborative process, and for this reason Dewey (1988) argues that no meaning is inherent, absolute, or existent solely in one's mind:

> Meaning is objective as well as universal. Originating as a concerted or combined method of using or enjoying things, it indicates a possible interaction, not a thing in separate singleness. A meaning may not of course have the particular objectivity which is imputed to it, as whistling does not actually portend wind, nor the ceremonial sprinkling of water

> indicate rain. But such magical imputations of external reference testify to the objectivity of meaning as such. Meanings are naturally the meaning of something or other; difficulty lies in discriminating the right thing. (p. 148)

Meaning only exists because of its connection to at least one other communicated experience, not in "separate singleness." Meaning therefore is not absolute, but may change depending on the context of a situation or after the occurrence of a new event.

The process of social construction is a cycle with many moving parts. As Pearce (2005) explains in his Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory, communication and world-building require interactions:

> CMM envisions communication acts as doing things (i.e., as performatives) and thus as making the events and objects in our social world. However, communicative acts cannot be done alone. Each act is done *to*, *for*, or *against* someone. Further, what is done is usually *after* and *before* what others do. The events and objects of the social world are not only made in communication, the process is one of co-construction, of being made by the conjoint action of multiple persons. (p. 43)

Every meaning is a result and cause of another. With each new event and/or interaction, meaning creation evolves and imposes its consequences. "But when an event has meaning, its potential consequences become its integral and funded feature. When the potential consequences are important and repeated, they form the very nature and essence of a thing, its defining, identifying, and distinguishing form" (Dewey, 1988, p. 143). A new communicated meaning will be put to the test every time that event occurs again. If the event occurs again and the original designated meaning still stands, then that meaning becomes more ingrained and it more deeply defines the identity and reality of the event. However, if the event repeats and the

communication surrounding it changes, then the meaning of the event changes. Dewey does not suggest meaning to be absolute, but he notes that a meaning may become near absolute the deeper it ingrains itself into an event.

Pearce (1989) warns against such a deep ingraining, or enmeshment, and instead advocates for mystery. According to Pearce (1989), becoming too enmeshed in stories is dangerous: “Entranced by the liberating power of the stories in which we are enmeshed, we are often blinded to the alternative worlds created by the stories of our neighbors, our ancestors, and our descendants” (p. 79). Becoming deeply enmeshed in stories can prevent people from seeing possibilities of other stories. This is why Pearce (1989) argues for the necessity of mystery: “*mystery* is the reminder that such lines are ultimately arbitrary distortions, no doubt necessary but not to be read with a complete suspension of disbelief” (p. 81). We need mystery as a reminder that our stories and meanings are not absolute, and that for every story there exists a mysterious alternate story.

The desire for power and social structures can often cloud the necessity of mystery from collective memory, and can selfishly work to establish one particular meaning as seemingly absolute. Berger and Luckmann (1966) outline different ways through which humans create and change reality. Berger and Luckmann (1966) explain the role the meaning creation process plays in power dynamics and social structures: “A second consequence is a strengthening of traditionalism in the institutionalized actions thus legitimated, that is, a strengthening of the inherent tendency of institutionalization toward inertia. Habitualization and institutionalization in themselves limit the flexibility of human actions” (p. 108). Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) traditionalism within institutions is similar to Pearce’s (1989) enmeshment. The more that a meaning is attributed to a given event, and enshrined in an institution or structure, the more

normalized, traditional, and habitual that event becomes (or, in Pearce's case, the more enmeshed in the story we are, and the less room there is for mystery). A deep enmeshment supported by social structures and institutions can have vital implications, as the attendant meanings may become extremely difficult to change; this is particularly dangerous if the tradition or institution is one that causes oppression or disadvantages a large number of people.

This is not to say that change and mystery cannot occur, but they do require human action. As Berger and Luckmann (1966) explain, "Because they are historical products of human activity, all socially constructed universes change, and the change is brought about by the concrete actions of human beings" (p. 107). Just as humans build the universe, they are also able to take it down and build it back up. However, this process is not easy and often opposing definitions can create tension: "These considerations imply that there will always be a social-structural base for competition between rival definitions of reality and that the outcome of the rivalry will be affected, if not always determined outright, by the development of this base" (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 110). After all, the more that people become enmeshed within stories of meaning, the harder it is to see an opposing view, or the mystery of an alternate narrative. Pearce (2005) addresses this tension as it exists within intercultural contexts, and argues that both sides of the issue must cooperate for change to occur: "In these conflicts between incommensurate social worlds, a minimal requirement of satisfactory performance includes an awareness of one's own cultural resources, a willingness to move beyond them, and the ability to find ways of cooperatively dealing with the conflict that transcend the social worlds of the participants" (p. 45). After all, meaning is a collaborative process. Just as humans work together to create meaning, humans have to work together to change it. This process does not come easily, and it often meets resistance, especially in settings where people hold tight to

traditional meanings. This is particularly true for sports settings, which are spaces where members hold tightly to traditionally constructed meanings. Meaning creation and change requires collaboration, but oftentimes people do not want to participate in this process. The next section of the essay will understand this tension through an analysis of Beyoncé's 2016 Super Bowl performance.

The Wrong Football "Formation"

Beyoncé's Super Bowl performance is not an event that derives meaning or significance from "separate singleness" (Dewey, 1988), but rather retains its meaning from the history and associated stories of sports and political protests in America and the tension that exists between them. The performance moved from an event to an object as people assigned meaning to it, exemplifying Dewey's (1988) explanation of the constructionist abilities of communication. The communication event of Beyoncé's performance took on multiple meanings, and acquired varying "representatives, surrogates, signs, and implicates," (Dewey, 1988, p. 132) as people began to categorize the event as positive, negative, or somewhere in between, all based on their own experiences with related meanings and events. People assigned meaning to the performance as they posted on social media, wrote articles online, reported the event on the news, and talked about it around the water cooler. These assigned meanings come from and build upon previously told stories about Beyoncé, football, sports, race, and political protests.

As constructionist authors explain, meaning is a process of chain reactions, of reinforced, readjusted, and readapted meaning creation and storytelling. Beyoncé's video and performance was in itself a part of the chain reaction that Pearce (2005) describes in his Coordinated Management of Meaning. Pearce explains that every action is done in a response to something, aimed at someone else, and elicits a response from someone in return. Beyoncé's performance

was a supplement to her video, which was arguably a response to a number of other objectivized events, from police brutality, to Hurricane Katrina, to race relations in America. The performance was directed at many different audiences: Levi's Stadium attendees, 111.9 million television viewers, and the innumerable people who saw or heard about the event after the live performance finished. The performance then elicited countless responses in the form of social media posts, television reports, online articles, public statements, and conversations between friends and family. The performance did not occur in isolation, but was an event that occurred in a large network of other meanings and events.

Pearce also argues that context and "oughtness" plays a large role in meaning creation. What people "ought" to do are large themes in the stories we tell. In Beyoncé's case, the questions surrounding context came in the form of either support or criticism for the choice to make a political statement at a Super Bowl game. The Super Bowl, along with football and American sports, is tied to its own set of meanings and stories that have developed over time through communication, thus influencing the meaning creation process following Beyoncé's performance. The dominant story is that American sports are for enjoyment. By this point in American history, the public has suspended a substantial amount of disbelief in this story, and they have collectively and continuously reinforced this narrative. People set aside their Sunday afternoons to watch games starting at 1pm and ending at 11pm. Beer companies work hard to reinforce this narrative, as they promote their product with images of young people at a bar, or in their living rooms, or at a stadium, all watching football and consuming beer as a way to enjoy the game and celebrate their team.

The narrative of football and enjoyment is heightened on the day of the Super Bowl, as people across the nation host and attend game-watch parties, thus making the event the most-

viewed program on American television. Spectators want to enjoy the event, and thus suspend disbelief that football is anything but fun and camaraderie. In this story, people "ought" to enjoy the game and create a fun experience. As Pearce (1989) explains, the more people believe a story or meaning, the more that they act accordingly with the set behaviors of that story. So, the more people believe football to be a happy occasion, the more they will act accordingly by abiding by the rules of "oughtness" (e.g., watching games, drinking beer, throwing super bowl parties), and the more they will resist opposing stories.

Football's constructed and communicated meaning of pleasure contributes to the chain reaction of meaning creation leading up to Beyoncé's performance, and is also a source of tension in the varying responses to the show. Beyoncé's performance, in isolation, had many political undertones alluding to racial injustice in America, from the song lyrics to the symbolism within the performance. In the context of the Super Bowl, essentially the peak of American professional sports, Beyoncé's narrative clashed with the story of football. The performance was not simple and fun unity. The performance was provocative, political, and strategic. The performance was a call to pull viewers out of their suspension of disbelief that football could be anything but pleasure, and to bring social issues to their attention. In the action of wearing black berets and raising fists to recall the Black Panthers, Beyoncé and her dancers brought Civil Rights and all of its related meanings to the Super Bowl. Many know that the Civil Rights movement was not a period of enjoyment, but rather of national tension, pain, and strife. The video to "Formation" evokes similar struggles as it highlights the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the horrors of police brutality, a commentary furthered by the dancers' posts about Mario Woods following the Super Bowl performance. Through "Formation," both the video and the

Super Bowl performance, Beyoncé tells a story of black struggle and black power, and a story of holding people accountable for the injustice they cause.

By bringing the civil rights movement and statements regarding modern racial injustice to the super bowl, Beyoncé provides a story that is a liberation from the seeming facticity of both football narratives and narratives of general American life. It is an alternate narrative that suggests that socially accepted norms do not have to reign supreme. Football does not have to be a space free of political commentary, and Americans should not ignore the racial injustices occurring in the United States. This alternate narrative, when viewed through the perspective of Pearce (1989), can be seen as mystery, for it suggests that our constructed meanings are not absolute. Pearce (1989) advocates for mystery, and warns against deep enmeshment. We can see the consequences of deep enmeshment when viewing Beyoncé's performance through Pearce's lens. As expected, the people who are deeply enmeshed in the story of football and American sports, such as former Mayor Giuliani, had a more difficult time accepting the mystery of a story in which the Super Bowl is a platform for social and political commentary.

Beyoncé's performance is not the first time that a political statement in an athletic context by a black person received resistance. In the 1968 Olympics, American gold and bronze medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos, respectively, stood on the Olympic podium with raised fists to both protest black poverty and stand to promote black American strength and unity. This simple political act had huge implications, and the athletes ended up losing their medals as a consequence: "It was a polarizing moment because it was seen as an example of black power radicalism… Mainstream America hated what they did" (Davis, 2008). Medal ceremonies in the Olympics hold a meaning of national pride and celebration, so a story where athletes protest their country on the podium is a blatantly opposing narrative. In a more recent

example, San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick knelt during the national anthem during every football game of the 2016 season as a silent but overt protest against racial injustice (Wyche, 2016). This controversial act continues to receive widely mixed reviews and criticisms, as some see the act as admirable, and others view it as a protest against America and the American military. This act not only challenges the narrative of behavioral "oughtness" at national sporting events, but it provides an alternate, liberating, mysterious narrative that supports political protest in the professional sports arena and erases the absoluteness of prior meanings surrounding sports.

For each of these instances of political protest within the context of American professional sports, protestors have faced consequences. Tommie Smith and John Carlos lost their medals, Colin Kaepernick has received criticism from Army officials, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and countless political commentators—and currently remains unsigned by any NFL team—and Beyoncé received calls for boycotts from police departments throughout the country. This is consistent with Dewey and Pearce's understanding that communicated meanings having consequences. New events can either reinforce or change previously constructed meanings. In Beyoncé's case, opposing critics of her performance reinforce the narrative of football existing as an exclusively enjoyable space. Supporters of the performance, however, fuel a change in the narrative of football.

So, which meaning will prevail, new or old? The answer goes back to Berger and Luckmann's (1966) explanation of communication, traditionalism, and institutions. As traditional meanings are strengthened through reinforcement, so is the strength of the institution it supports. On the surface, it may seem as though the institution facing opposition here is football and American professional sports. However, the meanings go deeper than that, and so do

the institutions at play. After all, what do Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Colin Kaepernick, and Beyoncé have in common? Not only are they all prominent black figures, but they all made statements about racial injustice at a professional sports event, and people were angry about it. Thus, amidst the various meanings of Beyoncé's performance exists the institution of race in America, although not explicitly stated. Instead of attacking Beyoncé's narrative regarding racial injustice, critics questioned the sub-narratives of the performance, including the appropriateness of the setting combined with the content of the performance (allusions to the Black Panthers, support of Mario Woods, all of the racially-charged messages within the "Formation" video that preceded the performance) and the interpreted attack on police officers. However, these narratives all focused on the performance and the video rather than the larger messages and social problems, which feeds into the support of the institution of race in America, an institution that the narrative of football supports and Beyoncé's performance challenges.

Race in itself is a story Americans have told and molded through communication for centuries. There is no absolutism that can be attributed to it. White people are not inherently superior, nor are people of any other race inherently inferior. Race has no inherent meaning. Humans have communicated meanings around race to make sense of aspects of their world, and have reinforced and recreated the details of the concept as events occurred throughout history, much to the benefit of some groups and the detriment of others. After hundreds of years of reinforcement, race has become a strong tradition and institution created through meaning construction, as per the process Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe. The structure has certainly evolved over time, and events such as the abolition of slavery, the Civil Rights movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement have challenged the narrative of race and have changed its definition. Recent public discourses regarding race have discussed different

perspectives such as white privilege, systemic racism, and whether or not we currently live in a post-race society. However, what has not changed is that the institution of race benefits whites, and thus because it maintains power for the powerful, the powerful try and maintain the tradition, and communicatively strengthen the institution through meaning reinforcement. The way to maintain the institution and reinforce its meaning is to not talk about it at all, or classify it as an event that "ought" not be discussed in particular spaces. This way, the event will not challenge the institution and no change will take place.

Football's narrative of enjoyment and entertainment, and therefore rejection of political commentary and institutional opposition, is one that benefits whites because conversations about race do not equate to fun entertainment, so conversations about race "ought" not exist in the context of football. Thus, when Beyoncé's performance clashed with the pleasantry narrative, she challenged the institution of race that otherwise can hide behind the safe and enjoyable narrative of football. Similarly, in the chain reaction of meaning creation, when people articulated responses to the performance that reinforced the story of football, they indirectly and unintentionally reinforced the institution of racial inequality. People deeply enmeshed in the stories of football and race acted in accordance with their suspension of disbelief, and thus responded in a way that reinforced the stories they believe.

The institution and traditions of race in America are deeply ingrained, as they have existed in the stories of America since the country's beginning. Countering these traditions, or offering mystery narratives that turn into accepted narratives, is no easy task, even for a superstar like Beyoncé. However, Berger and Luckmann (1966) and offer arguments for how constructed meanings can change. Berger and Luckmann (1966) acknowledge the difficulty in changing stable structures but also note, "breakdown in the taken-for-granted acceptance of the monopoly

accelerates social change" (p. 113). Beyoncé's performance was a notable breakdown in the acceptance, or suspension of disbelief, in the monopoly of meanings surrounding football and race, and thus holds the potential to accelerate social change.

Beyoncé will not likely create this change singlehandedly, but could progress a chain reaction of meaning creation that will have an impact. After all, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argue that it is human action that builds up structures and traditions, so "the change is brought about by the concrete actions of human beings" (p. 107). Beyoncé's performance is a concrete action that facilitates change through the offering of a mystery narrative that challenges the dominant meanings and constructed definitions of reality within the context of football and the institution of race. However, this one act will not guarantee change. As we see from Pearce (2005), two conflicting meanings require people to cooperatively choose and work to change a cultural meaning and norm (p. 45). Both sides of the conflict must contribute to the process of redefining reality by suspending disbelief into the opposing narrative. After all, meaning creation is collaborative. One person, such as Beyoncé, cannot create or dictate meaning, but rather the entire public must work together to create meaning, even if that means acknowledging and resolving conflicting definitions of reality.

Mystery: The Gateway to Social Change

The constructionist perspective puts the power of meaning creation and construction into the hands of collective communication, and thus the entirety of human life is made up of constructed meanings. One sees this process in Beyoncé's Super Bowl performance and the discourse following the event, discourse which both stems from the previously created meanings of football in America and also works to define and redefine the meanings of the performance, football, and the institution of race. If one enmeshes themselves deeply within the story of

football, then they will believe Beyoncé should not have presented a politically charged performance. However, Beyoncé's story is the mystery. It is the alternate narrative that reminds everyone that no meaning is absolute, and that it is dangerous to suspend ones disbelief too deeply into the stories of any given tradition or institution. Mysteries are the gateway to social change, as they expose people to new meaning possibilities and new worldviews. Because meaning is collaborative, these alternate meanings must find attention and acceptance in the public sphere in order to be successful. Beyoncé alone cannot change football or the institution of race, but her performance serves as an event that is part of a larger mystery, a mystery wherein stories that argue that race and its traditions are harmful, and are in need of reevaluation. It may seem like a difficult task, as race is a stable institution thanks to years of meaning reinforcement. However, it was humans who have built the institution, so it is humans who have the remarkable ability to collectively and communicatively create change that will produce a worldview more beneficial to all.

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